



THERE ARE NO SHORTCUTS TO QUALITY SPECIAL EDUCATION

OPINIONS FROM THE FIELD

BY ELIZABETH MITCHELL AND THOMAS WIDSTRAND

It's been a good day. Only two people crying in the special education office — one parent and one teacher.

As teachers working in special education, we navigate a tricky road with families. As they come to understand their children as learners with challenges, a few tears aren't unusual while they confide their worries for their child's future. For the teachers ... you might well ask why a professional would find themselves brought to tears by a day at school, but it's all too common, and it demonstrates how professionals have been caught between a flawed system and the needs of the students and families they serve.

There is no question that Ontarians place a high value on education. It's why there is so much coverage in the media about our education system — how it is thriving and on top of the world (as the government touts our international standings) or failing children all over the province (a viewpoint sometimes heard from the public or in the media). And in the midst of this, it seems that there are few issues more polarizing than special education. The primary values of the system seem to be the conflicting ideas that everything must be done to maximize the potential of the most

vulnerable students, and that it must be done at bargain basement prices.

With decades of experience between us, we've had the opportunity to examine how students with exceptional learning needs are served by our system. Whether as a classroom teacher, an in-school resource teacher, a special education board consultant/co-ordinator, or a special education parent, between the two of us we have occupied a variety of roles. We'd like to think that, over the course of our careers, Ontario schools have become a more welcoming place for students with disabilities and that we have moved closer to an inclusive environment that values the contributions and meets the needs of the great variety of students that walk through our doors.

There certainly are shifts in attitudes, and both pedagogical and technological innovations that should allow this positive transformation. But there are also limitations, most specifically a government that wants to point to excellence in education, and simultaneously to a frugality that often seems to work against it. The Ministry is there for the press release, but the hard work of

implementing those promises falls to the educators. And paying for those promises? In special education it often seems that we're using a "promise first—pay later" approach.

The advance of another provincial election (and relative peace with the teachers' unions, thanks to a recent contract extension) provides us with an opportunity to have a debate that can focus on issues in special education. From the front lines, the primary issues are coming into focus:

1. Inclusion: The province continues to shift towards a philosophy of 'inclusion', a blanket approach being clumsily applied to a vast and diverse demographic of tens of thousands of students with special needs. This proves to be a great difficulty in a province that does not lend itself to one-size-fits-all solutions and has logistical challenges that vary from one school district to the next. The fact that this is being implemented as special education budgets fail to keep pace with needs suggests that the powers that be have never understood the true cost of inclusion.

2. Funding: The funding formula, fundamentally flawed and inequitable, allows some "flexibility" for school districts. This encourages the flow of money between competing priorities, so that some special education funding is always at risk, and supports are inconsistent across the province's 72 districts. Parents are the monkey-in-the-middle in this game of pass-the-buck between districts who bemoan the lack of funds, and the Ministry's insistence that it has provided the money for the district to allocate as they see fit.

3. Support: For a classroom teacher, access to the education workers who support the development and delivery of programming (whether specialist special education teachers or educational assistants) has been reduced for financial reasons. Teachers are left to try to implement programming without the proper support; educational assistants are there to maintain health and safety. In other words, unless one is in imminent danger as justified by lengthy and bureaucratic processes, there will be no extra support provided.

4. Training: As students are integrated into classrooms and school communities, their teachers must, by necessity, become specialists in every exceptionality represented in their classrooms. The time and training to do this is limited, and the average teacher is so run off their feet that they may even decline the training offered to them. Even the best planned day may go off the rails if a student has a crisis. Teachers and administrators are often reluctant to leave students and colleagues in that difficult situation.

5. Equity: Without enough funding, sufficient staff, or the training to help staff do their jobs, some students will receive better services than others. Aside from the fact that students with special education needs are already at the ends of a bell-curve that favours the middle, within special education there

are still haves and have-nots. Access to support and services is more likely to come to families with the skills to advocate or the funds to employ professional advocates. Throw in a language barrier, a socio-economic struggle, or systemic biases that may underestimate the potential of the students, and that advocacy is less likely to happen or to be successful.

EDUCATORS RECOGNIZE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF INCLUSION, AS ONE OF A RANGE OF OPTIONS THAT WILL ALLOW US TO MEET STUDENT NEEDS. HOWEVER, IT'S IMPORTANT TO EXAMINE THE MOTIVATIONS BEHIND WHAT APPEARS TO BE A POSITIVE SHIFT IN SOCIETAL ATTITUDES.

What does all of this mean for a family trying to navigate the system, and for their children? For starters, it means that being included in a classroom of their same aged peers is held up as the revered ideal. It also means that in a system that gives parents a great deal of power over decisions of how and where programming will be delivered, parents often choose and even insist upon an inclusive setting in spite of the limited resources available to make it successful. It would seem that the promise of inclusion is the rare area where the school districts and families can consistently agree. Educators recognize the potential benefits of inclusion, as one of a range of options that will allow us to meet student needs. However, it's important to examine the motivations behind what appears to be a positive shift in societal attitudes.

As children of the 70s we did not share our classrooms with students who had significant learning needs. Children with intellectual delays, significant behaviour concerns, physical exceptionalities (including loss of vision and hearing) were streamed out of the "typical" classroom, often in different schools altogether.

The understanding that our schools should reflect the diversity in our community and that all students benefit from the opportunity to learn from one another was not something that was initiated from within the system — it was the work of dedicated parent advocates. They insisted that a high quality education that pushed their children to reach their potential with and among their peers, in their community, was the right of all children. That advocacy led to an understanding of the range of abilities among children with disabilities, an emerging awareness of autism spectrum disorders, and contributed to a society that has expanded the definition of human rights to include the grounds of ability. Inclusion became recognized as the enlightened option, but certainly not the easy way out given the resources required to do it responsibly. This has been the challenge to which the system has not yet risen.

Somewhere along the line the message was lost that students with a greater diversity of learning needs in a single classroom would require an infusion of support to build capacity and ongoing funding to ensure the programming was at a consistently high level. It is clear: inclusive models of education (where students with a range of needs learn in the same setting) cost more, not less, than specialized (and segregated) classes.

As boards around the province promote and implement inclusion, the increase in funding has not been forthcoming. Special education monies are allocated or “sweated” by the province with funding meant to address a range of the financial requirements of supporting students beyond the per pupil amount given for all students. From the perspective of an educator in the classroom struggling to meet the exceptional needs of a variety of students, funding is always insufficient. The ever-tightening belt affects special education services in two significant ways. Instructional support costs money. Training costs money. And both are essential.

Nowhere are the funding shortfalls more evident than in the provision of educational assistants. Classrooms can have students with diagnoses of intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, giftedness, autism, physical exceptionalities, but another educator, in the form of an EA, is typically only available if there are concerns about safety (e.g., behavioural needs that may require that the student be apart from their classmates or continually supported in order to keep them safe) or health (e.g., students with intensive medical needs, or requiring other major physical supports).

Those teachers in tears at the end of the day? They could be developing programming for a non-verbal student with a developmental disability, and coordinating the delivery of the program with an educational assistant. Or struggling to address the needs of a young child who hasn't yet been diagnosed but whose behaviour requires that the rest of the students be evacuated from the classroom on a regular basis. Or trying to plan instruction that meets the needs of a gifted student with an anxiety disorder who can't work independently, or students working several grade levels below their peers, who one day may be diagnosed with learning disabilities. Or juggling recommendations made by speech & language pathologists, occupational therapists, and resource teachers (all of whom are desperately needed but never allocated enough time to provide meaningful interventions). These teachers are at their wits' end because of the disconnect between their students' potential and the limitations of what one person can accomplish in helping them reach that potential.

Those teachers with the range of students they support? They are often not special education specialists, or experts in the myriad of special needs they may find themselves supporting over the course of their careers. Certainly some of them become specialists, through experience, through courses they take on weekends, in evenings, and in the summer, and through the training provided by their school district. A professional with such a variety of needs to meet and new knowledge to acquire on such a regular basis doesn't stand much chance of staying current across the entire spectrum of special education needs.

Just as your family doctor must stay well-informed, but will ultimately call in another doctor with a more narrow field of

expertise, teachers need access to the guidance of an educator who has studied and practiced within a particular field of special education. More belt-tightening means those educators are thinner on the ground and more likely to be generalists rather than having a detailed skill set.

What do these generalists who are often in school-based support roles do? They ensure that paperwork is done, run to support students in crisis, develop professional learning to help class teachers program for all of their students and assess students to help guide their programming. Of course this goes along with advocating for students, meeting with students and ensuring they learn the skills to be as successful as they can be.

Teachers at the system level, consultants, coaches, instructional leaders or coordinators who are responsible for implementing policy, guiding system-wide programming, and consulting on the most challenging cases are often so busy that they can only provide a list of suggestions before they are off to the next school.

As advocates for students, for their families, and for the teachers on the front lines, we can predict which students are more likely to be successful. Parents with the skill, the will, and the resources to insist upon the education to which their children are entitled, often get it. They may try to find a home in the catchment area of a school that has been recommended to them (or with high test scores — a misleading tool for all parents especially for those trying to find a place for the students whose needs are never considered by those tests). They may attend meetings, request more meetings, appeal decisions — insistence breeds success. Others, entering a system that is already operating in the red, may believe it when they are told that the limitations of the systems are inflexible, and the odds for success plummet. Either way, this is not the picture of a welcoming educational community.

That colleagues and the families of the students most vulnerable in this system trust us to help support and guide their way through elementary school is an extraordinary privilege and responsibility. There is so much possibility in the students — students with needs that once would have limited their ability to succeed and flourish are now recognized as having the potential to soar beyond the dreams of previous generations. And for the students whose needs mean that they will always receive support from society, they will live in a society run by adults who once shared their classrooms and have developed empathy for peers with special needs. The hope in the eyes of these parents as we discuss their children is a sacred trust ... and the knowledge that the system has the promise to meet the challenge could bring you to tears. ●

ELIZABETH MITCHELL and **THOMAS WIDSTRAND** are members of the Special Education Standing Committee of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. Elizabeth works as a special education resource teacher in the Halton District School Board, and Thomas is a special education coordinator with the Toronto District School Board. Their reflections in this article represent experiences from the different roles they have had over the years, and the input they receive from colleagues around the province.